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ABSTRACT

Using Ariadne's thread in the narrative of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the elusiveness of language, this paper explores the concept of "self" to prepare for the discussion of autobiography as a "tool" for teaching writing, and to create a connection between a politically enabled self, a private self, and critical theory. The paper discusses the enabling of students and encouraging their self-identity--touching on the familial self, the writing self, the political self, the public self, and the metaphysical basis of self and self construction. The paper advises that students need to explore the "self," the events in their lives, the "real me" as operating within the boundaries of social context, to see their voices as part of a communal dialect that is neither fixed nor stable; and further, that, rather than seeing experience as a method of understanding some essential truths, personal narrative should be perceived as a product of ideology. The paper concludes by stating that embracing the poststructural assertion that a person can only understand individual intentions as they are constructed within a social reality neglects to acknowledge that individuals can reflect on and trace those threads that form their subjectivity, and with this understanding, challenge and change the social discourse that determines their identities. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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> If temple and labyrinth provide the models of sacred stillness and profane movement, the threshold is the model of the transitional phase which links these two fundamental modes of being.
> Angus Fletcher, "Positive Negation"

The narrative of the labyrinth, first told by Ovid in The Metamorphosis and later retold in various ways by Appollodorus, Plutarch, Eurpides and Sophocles, has become a significant image for poststructural theory. The structure of the Cretan labyrinth helps us to visualize the Derridean concept of a center that "must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center" (Derrida WD 279). The difficulty with wending one's way through the labyrinth is used as a metaphor for the elusiveness of language which, as it points the way towards meaning outside of the maze of linguistics, becomes the very obstacle that thwarts any expectations for meaning. Yet, if we seriously accept the poststructural thesis that questions the metaphysics of presence and regards discourse as a play of differences that are interrelated and constantly shifting their relationships with one another, how can we interpret the figure of Ariadne who provides Theseus with something at once essentially solid and metaphysical? The clue of a thread to guide him out of the Cretan maze, a thread that invokes the notion of sovereign authorial presence, makes it possible for Theseus to act as an heroic individual. Ariadne's thread provides us with the comfort of presence, with "repetition and the narrative line" (Miller 66), with an escape from the maze of language. But the thread, which allows Theseus to penetrate the impenetrable and then escape to tell the tale, weaves its way through the labyrinth and so is also enmeshed in the elusive nature of language itself, which strains against its own meanings and refuses to be contained by them. Accepting the thread and the maze means accepting a bifold authority based on irreconcilable differ-

ences:

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which leaves the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the play. (Derrida WD 292)

When Ariadne hands Theseus the thread, she is a sovereign, self-aware political consciousness and, at the same time, is determined by her political marginality and actions. The thread in the maze represents a self that is at once escaped and "outside," and at the same time inevitably immersed in the flow of discourse.

The labyrinth, a place of endlessly twisting paths and no seeming escape, built by Daedalus at the command of Minos the King of Crete to contain the Minotaur, a monster, half bull, half human, the offspring of Minos' wife Pasiphae and a wonderfully beautiful bull, becomes part of Minos' plan to avenge the death of his son Androgeus, who had been killed by an Athenian bull. Minos invades Athens, razes it to the ground and, as part of the tribute due a conqueror, demands that every nine years fourteen Athenian maidens and youths are to be left in the labyrinth as food for the Minotaur. Theseus, hero of this narrative, volunteers to be part of the sacrifice so he may kill the Minotaur once he is inside the labyrinth. He doesn't seem to have much of a plan, but fortunately for Theseus, Minos' daughter Ariadne falls in love with him. She sends for Daedalus, asks him to show her a way out of the labyrinth, and then tells Theseus she will bring about his escape if he promises to take her back to Athens and marry her. Theseus agrees, pledges his undying passion, and so Ariadne gives him the ball of thread she received from Daedalus. Theseus is to fasten one end to the inside of the

door and then unwind the ball as he walks through the maze.

With thread in hand, Theseus walks into the maze looking for the Minotaur. He finds the beast asleep, batters the monster to death, and then, with the help of Ariadne's thread, finds his way out of the maze taking with him the rest of the intended victims. He collects Ariadne and flees in a ship towards Athens. Unfortunately for Ariadne, the ship makes a stop at the island of Naxos where, after a few beers and some second thoughts, Theseus deserts her as she sleeps (Rose 183-84, *with some slight revisions*).

Apparently, Adriadne is consoled by Dionysus, but it is not my intention in retelling the story to discuss the endless twists of metaphor in a narrative that attempts to reconcile an image of love, a puzzle's clue, and an escape as one narrative pattern with an image of desertion, betrayal, and loss as another narrative pattern. Rather, I would like to use the fragmentary, discarded clue, the thread which provides safe conduct out of the maze as a metaphor for those bits of self, what I call the familial self and students refer to as the "real me", that we hold onto just long enough to lead us to a comfortable place in writing ideological or subject position and then discard. By discarding this familial self, we cease to look at what shapes our social identity. What is all too often missing from writing classrooms is not a critique of the familiar social landscape, but a questioning of the knower and the "real me" assumptions that govern the shape of social or public discourse. We turn away from the path we chose to interpret the labyrinth of discourse, forgetting the threads of 'self' that have led us to where we stand.

I would like to explore the concept of 'self' to prepare for a discussion of autobiography as a "tool" for teaching writing and to create a connection between a politically enabled 'self', a private 'self' and critical theory. In discussing the concept of 'self' I will show how the 'self' must be conceived in order for it to point a way through the

maze created by poststructuralism and become a political starting point and source of political direction for student writers. As writing 'selves' capable of thinking critically, students need to accept both the changing nature of the 'self' within a cultural context and the necessity of adopting a stable role for the 'self' as political starting point. Enacting critical theory involves encouraging students to understand that the 'writing self' needs the strength of a public, collective voice and that this voice is constructed within the private, familial realm.

While poststructural theories can be important to teaching practice for their insistence on disrupting the possibility for a single legitimizing ground of knowledge, the consequence of being continually subversive or disruptive is the impossibility of making political or social choices. Accepting the 'writing self' as a continually shifting subject position without including the possibility of a subject position as a political starting point, makes social or cultural change impossible--a 'self' that is continually shifting in its social context can have no real effect on that context, thus negating the aspect of poststructural rhetoric that wishes to politically enable students. Politically enabling students means that at this point in the evolution of composition theory and practice many writing teachers are doing something besides interpreting rhetorical forms. Rather this intervening in/with language and history, pushing students to recognize and "redraw the boundaries" of gender, race and class carries the responsibility of enabling selves that are not just politically determined, but who work at determining politics.

The responsibility of enabling students poses the question of the formulation of the self which has been a site of struggle for poststructural theorists and consequently a complex issue of contention among those rhetorical theorists most influenced by feminism, Marxism, and deconstructionism. As Mark Poster notes, however, this point of disagreement has been "remarkably consistent," as theories that attempt to differen-

tiate themselves from each other all strive to reject a definition of self that is too centered, too unified, too essentialist (Poster 53).

Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the 'true essence' of things. In Western metaphysics, essence is transhistorical and eternal, and constitutes the fundamental nature or quality of any given thing and, as such, this term then operates as a centering principle. By accepting the invariable and fixed characteristics of any object or person, essentialist theories support the "naturalness" of behaviors in regards to gender, class or race. The desire for a center, an essence, comes about because essence guarantees that a particular personality, a particular "I" is the unifying principle underlying not only the structure but all the activity that is enacted in a certain space. This is an especially comforting space for students when they construct a dichotomy between the "real me" and the "public me." No matter how much their public voices may distress others, they can fall back on the "real me," the self that is disconnected from public opinion or public policy.

But this "real me" parallels a belief in the presence of Being that demands not only the assumption that given essences catalog things "naturally" into kinds, but that the self occupies a pure, pre-social, pre-linguistic space that is accessible and transparent. Conversely, poststructuralists propose that it is language, the names artificially and arbitrarily attached to things, that fixes existence of objects in the mind. To a poststructuralist, the self, rather than being naturally there, is composed of a web of differentiating meanings subject to social and political determination. Poststructuralism has revealed the instability of thinking of subjects as having essential, irreducible characteristics, or as following fixed behavior patterns. Deconstruction's relentless dismembering of binary opposites, the embracing of differences in order to disrupt all logocentric thought, and the denial of the separation of signifier and signified, leave no ground or reference to anchor any notion of self in a presence of Being, no hope of finding a

true essence. Self-identity becomes limitless as indeterminacy collapses any chance of meaning within a play of difference. For Derrida, the self operates as a figure of undecidability that replaces the dualisms of Western metaphysics. But even Derrida's rigorous anti-essentialist discourse agrees that despite the decentering of the self, the "disruption of presence" evident in deconstruction's strategies of reversal/displacement (Derrida WD 292), the "self" can never move beyond the sphere of Western metaphysics, only work inside of the play of language.

> It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also because, for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and guaranteed by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (Derrida OG 6)

Any attempt to think outside of metaphysical systems of thought only causes us to become entangled in the terms on which this system depends.

But while caught in the constant interplay of denying/accepting the metaphysical basis of a self, we run the risk of overlooking the social groundedness of composing a self within a linguistic system, in language. Refiguring the problem of the nature of the self within a social/historical context, within the forces of ideology, not only frees us from regarding the self as a hopeless effort to capture a transcendental signified, but allows for the possibility of formulating the self as a dialogue with the "real" world. In this dialogue, the self has no individual motivations, but is determined by social discourse and cultural practices. Defining the self as formed by cultural determinants contradicts many of liberatory education's rhetorical notions of self-empowerment and self-autonomy. Self-empowerment hinges on the essentialist appeal to a universal class or gender oppression. In this sense, the social context must be critiqued and

revised in order for the self to be transformed, achieve a "voice," and overcome his/her cultural oppression. Historical materialism, which in principle has seemed destined to construct a history of Western culture that would over turn more positivistic narratives of economic or social progress, has often remained paralyzed by essentialist notions of class consciousness, class ideology, and class interest, which make too simple a distinction between the subject (understood as a monad) and this same subject's relationship to various social structures. But the very notion of a coherent, essential identity, a "voice," allows students to claim not only an identity but a context as well; to claim the power to create a recognizable public self along with reforming the institutions that control their own lived relations.

Diana Fuss reminds us that essence is a sign, and as such is historically contingent, unstable, and constantly subject to change and redefinition. Because the history of Western philosophy can be read as repeated attempts to answer the question of essence, suggesting its elusiveness, Fuss writes that "essence is not monolithically coded" (18-21). More important to my attempts at defining the nature of self within a social epistemic rhetoric, she further notes that it is important to make a distinction between "falling into" essentialism and "activating" essentialism:

> "Deploying" or "activating" on the other hand, implies that essentialism may have some strategic or interventionary value. What I am suggesting is that the political investments of the sign "essence" are predicated on the subject's complex positioning in a particular social field, and that the appraisal of this investment depends not on interior values intrinsic to the sign itself but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it. (Fuss 20)

The political benefits of accepting the contradictions created by the juxtaposition of poststructuralism and essentialism, for example of attempting an understanding of

gender differences by defining "woman" as a unified class or experience, don't outweigh the dangers of erasing the real, material differences between women. While the foundation of identity defined as experience may be metaphysical in intent, this notion does not mean that experience is necessarily present to us in the form of an unmediated "real." Louis Althusser notes that experience, as ideologically cast, is not a real or immediate presence. The only reliable means of knowing experience is as a product of ideology (225).

Our experience of our subjectivity is a construct mediated by a social discourse, or as Foucault defines it, our selves are "totally imprinted by history" (FR 83). Subjective experiences are determined in some sense by social discourses and social practices "resulting from such a complex and unpredictable network of overlapping and crisscrossing elements that no unilinear directionality is perceivable and in fact no final or efficient cause exists" (Alcoff 416). In The Use of Pleasure, Michel Foucault introduces the question of the nature of the self as a problem of "self-constitution," by looking at how the subject responds to discursive practices:

> It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject. After first studying the games of truth in their interplay with one another, as exemplified by certain empirical sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then studying their interaction with power relations, as exemplified by punitive practices--I felt obliged to study the games of truth in the relationship of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject. (Foucault UP 6).

Foucault attempts to define self-constitution as part of the play of social codes, discourses, and systems of knowledge. For Foucault, it is discourse that shapes and determines the system of social practices: "The individual wrestles with self-constitution through the manipulation of symbols, through carefully elaborated and systematized

rules of formation, enunciative statements, and so forth" (Poster 68).

But, knowing the self, or constructing the self in its relation to ideology, or constructing the place of a certain 'self' within a certain social context, constitutes an act of essentialism. What is essential to poststructural definitions of 'self' is the positionality of the self in an ideological context, what has been termed "subject-position." But, because we must remember that essence, as a linguistic sign, is not stable, we must also be aware that subject-positions are neither fixed, nor irreducible but determined by social practices. A hierarchy of identities is set up within each speaking subject and these various 'selves' never merge, but are in a continual negotiation.

The tension between the familial "real me" and a public voice takes into account that the language of texts contests fixed identities so that the organizing system of any utterance is outside of, not within the individual identity includes the shifting relationships with the peculiarities of our culture. Defining the personal, the "real me" as the product of an individual psyche constructs rhetorical studies as insular, drained of political context, ideological analysis and intellectual rigor, the tools necessary to understand and change the social hierarchies and cultural systems that have created and sustained gender, race and class imbalances. The engaging a public voice can't be thought as one dramatic movement from the personal to the public, inward to outward, but as a continual exchange between (sometimes competing) multiple subject positions. This sense of not being able to respond to texts from a pure, subjective stance, the impossibility of hiding behind the "real me" and "that's just my opinion" became apparent this past quarter when my basic writing class discussed Sally Tisdale's "We Do Abortions Here." Most of the students could not reconcile Tisdale's ambiguities, her metaphor of "merciful violence" with their pro-life, Christian beliefs. They found it difficult to recognize that what they thought were their own, subjective, "deep down in my heart" opinions had all been formed from the outside, even outside of and conflicting

with their day to day realities. Nor did the students recognize how those opinions and experiences constructed the reality they lived in; how their personal feelings created the laws that regulate abortion, formed the groups that demonstrate in front of abortion clinics, limit the availability of birth control and sex education. The writing assignment I finally decided to give them asked them to imagine themselves as part of a Senate Committee given the responsibility to write a "just" abortion law that would take into account specific cases and the government's or society's role in our reproductive lives.

In working through her stance on abortion, one student claimed during all our class discussions that it was not necessary for her to have an opinion because abortion did not effect her personally, nor would it in the future, and she "didn't care whether it was illegal or not." In one of her journal entries she wrote "On the subject of abortions I just want to bail out. I don't want to say who is right, nor who is wrong. I want to be able to shut my front door and say you decide." Jennifer then claimed that she didn't want the responsibility of telling other people what to do, but my assignment was forcing her to "make a law that would effect everybody." Her final essay reflected the struggle between her experience and the experiences of others. Pregnant and single at nineteen, she decided to keep her baby because "abortion takes a bite out of her soul." As she worked through with the assignment she explored the particular experiences that surrounded her decision. Her feelings against abortion, she wrote in her essay, "come from practicing [her] religion," but she further explored the history of her decision: "I have to admit that my age at the time gave e a little more strength, but had I been thirteen, twelve, or even sixteen I may have been more afraid of my parents, or ashamed to let my peers know of my dilemma." She then observed the lives and decisions of women who have been raped, or who are pregnant with a severely deformed child. Jennifer concluded her essay by writing "I have to see that although I chose not to have an abortion, I did in fact have a choice." Placing her personal narra-

tive, her "real me" against the personal narratives of others, allowed Jennifer to see the connections between her life and institutional practices, and she tentatively reconstructed those practices because her "two daughters may need to make other decisions."

Students need to explore the 'self,' the events in their lives, the "real me" as operating within the boundaries of social context, to see their voices as part of a communal dialect that is neither fixed nor stable. In order for students to explore what it means to be subjects within a particular culture, they need to develop their voices within the shifting political contexts and struggles for their communal classroom experience. Theodore Adorno warns us in Prisms that by keeping our personal experiences outside the realm of ideology, by positing the category of individual experience as the basis for inquiry, we merely encourage the notion of self as autonomous and in control. When the relationship between self and culture is ignored, there is a tendency for autobiography to become static and essentialized. Personal experience emerges as the truth of an individual subject, but the 'self' is never as unified or knowable as students perceive it to be. Rather than seeing experience as a method of understanding some essential truths, personal narrative needs to be perceived as a product of ideology. Including social relations in students' responses to texts allows not only an identification with class consciousness, but also a site to critique this consciousness, to offer alternative social structures which recognize that their responses to texts do reflect meaning, they constitute meaning.

Poststructural rhetorics are asking for a definition of 'self' which can accommodate both an understanding of the necessity for an essential collective consciousness in order to engage political/social issues, and an understanding that, because the forming of this self is embedded in discourse, the self can neither be static nor finitely knowable, never be the "real me." Students need to be able to think critically about the

economic, political and social behaviors that have shaped them, to view themselves through the frame of cultural and linguistic determinants and then to shape that same frame with the power of their socially constructed discourse. Understanding that the world is linguistically constructed, that "selves are constituted by the ways of thinking and seeing that inhere in social organizations" (Fish 336) does not mean that we must believe pessimistically that we are trapped and constrained by that construction. Viewing "reality" through the frames created by ideologies helps make it clear to students that there are other ways of expressing "reality," that we can both deconstruct and reconstruct our realities to an enabling degree.

Empowering students by teaching them to think critically would not entail teaching a set of cognitive processes, but teaching an understanding of praxis as embracing a commitment to social change. When taught to think critically about their social roles, students' identities can become part of the reconstruction of their social context. An individual's subject position can be "actively utilized as a location for the construction of meaning . . . rather than simply a place from where meaning is discovered" (Alcoff 434). Embracing the poststructural assertion that one can only understand individual intentions as they are constructed within a social reality neglects to acknowledge that individuals can reflect on and trace those threads that form their subjectivity, and with this understanding, challenge and change the social discourse that determines their identities.

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